



# THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MARYLAND

## TESTIMONY BEFORE THE MARYLAND COMMISSION ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

THE RIGHT REVEREND EUGENE TAYLOR SUTTON  
Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland  
August 19, 2008

Good Afternoon. Chairman Civiletti and members of the Commission on Capital Punishment, I am very grateful for your invitation to testify this afternoon on this matter of moral urgency in our nation and in our state. As bishop of the Diocese of Maryland in the Episcopal Church USA, I am the chief pastor and spiritual leader of nearly 50,000 Marylanders in Baltimore City and ten counties throughout the state. There are also two other Episcopal Dioceses in the state, encompassing the Eastern Shore and the four counties near Washington, DC. Thus the collective membership of Episcopalians in Maryland is nearly 100,000 members. The Episcopal Church, our national body, represents 2.5 million Episcopalians. I am also pleased to join Archbishop O'Brien and Bishop Schol on this panel; their commitment to social justice and to the ethics of Jesus inspires me in my new ministry as the Episcopal Bishop of Maryland.

We applaud and praise Governor O'Malley's moral courage to place a moratorium on state-sponsored executions in Maryland. We hope and pray that this commission will conclude that the death penalty should be abolished in this great state.

For decades, The Episcopal Church has voiced strong public opposition to capital punishment. Our essential question today is whether, without exception, the death penalty should be imposed on someone convicted of murdering another human being. Our unequivocal answer is "no." The Christian faith is rooted in both testaments of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In the Bible, we find that every human being is given life by God, and only God the righteous Judge has the right to deny life. Of course, we understand that the state must seek justice and prosecute wrongdoing, but we cannot condone a decision by the state to pronounce a sentence of death for wrongdoing---no matter how violent and brutal the crime of the perpetrator may have been. Because of our belief in a just and moral God, there is simply no moral justification for the state to execute a child of God in the name of justice.

The Episcopal Church has carefully studied the application of the death penalty in many states. Invariably, in each case, we have concluded that the death penalty is *immoral, unjust and ineffective*. It is immoral, first of all, because as Christians we are commanded to adhere to the ethics of Jesus who continually forbade violence as a means to solve problems that are caused by evil.

Second, the death penalty is unjust because of the hugely disproportionate number of poor and black defendants who receive the death sentence. It is a sad truth that in our society, it is the wealthy are able to "buy" their way out of being executed by the state. As one prominent Episcopalian lawyer in Maryland told me recently, "true justice comes with a price tag---justice paid is justice won." And third, the death penalty is ineffective in that it has never been shown to have deterred anyone from committing a violent crime, nor has it lowered the murder rate in any state that regularly executes its most violent criminals.

These arguments are surely familiar to this panel, but let us now consider one more objection to the death penalty. How, in the end, does killing its citizens help the state to build the nonviolent, just and civil society that we all desire for ourselves and our children? At every baptism in an Episcopal church, our members vow to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves...and to respect the dignity of every human being." (*Book of Common Prayer*, p. 305)



## THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF MARYLAND

*That* is the power of love, a power that saved our nation from violent ruin in the 1960's. I am still convinced it is the most powerful weapon that we have to deter the evil of violence...more powerful than the electric chair, more effective than a lethal injection. We are not going to kill our way out of a culture that is awash in violence. That is why I implore you to believe in that power again in our day, and reject the death penalty in our great State of Maryland.

Thank you again for this opportunity to speak on this important issue. I welcome your questions.

*For more information on Bishop Sutton or this testimony, contact the Office of Public Affairs for the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland, Jack J. Pannell, Jr. 410/467-1399 or [jpannell@ang-md.org](mailto:jpannell@ang-md.org).*